Words

Ethics, morals and moral philosophy

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Many scientists and men of action have little sympathy with discussions of words, regarding all such as easy to settle – 'Look it up in the dictionary!' – or as trivial – 'Just word-chopping!.' But disputes about words cannot always be settled so easily, since dictionaries may well just record the ambiguities which have occasioned the disputes; and they are often anything but trivial, since the meanings we attach to words certainly influence, and may even determine, our perceptions of the world or our values. Indeed, in some cases there is no clear distinction between changing one's view on the meanings of words and changing one's view of the facts. These points are illustrated by the confusions surrounding the words 'ethics' and 'morals' as these words are used in medical discussion.

Ethics and morals

The first use of 'ethics' we shall note is that in which it is synonymous with 'morals'. In this sense of the term an 'ethical judgement' is the judgement of an ordinary moral agent about moral right and wrong, or about what someone morally ought or ought not to do, or about whether or not someone behaved fairly, or about whether or not someone is a morally good person. In this sense we might say that a certain question is a matter of ethics, rather than of politics.

But if 'ethics' and 'morals' can be co-extensive in their areas of application there are also, secondly, uses of 'ethics' and 'morals' in terms of which they refer to roughly distinguishable areas *within* 'ethics' or 'morals' in the first sense. Thus, in popular speech the term 'morals' has become narrowed to matters of sexual behaviour, whereas high-minded people who are aware that there are problems of conduct other than sexual ones have pre-empted the word 'ethics' to refer to them. In terms of this distinction we find that the politician who tells us lies is deemed (if caught at it) 'unethical', whereas his mistress who is caught at it (no need to say what) is deemed to have 'loose morals'. In short, 'ethics' and 'morals' can refer to two different areas of ordinary morality in the first sense.

Professional ethics

Different again, thirdly, and of greatest interest to the medical profession, is the use of 'ethics' in the expression 'professional ethics', of which medical ethics is an important branch. All codes of professional ethics embody three main components:

a) standards of professional competence;
b) standards of professional integrity;
c) accepted professional procedures,

or, in a broad sense, 'etiquette'. A professional code of this sort can acquire the force of moral imperatives in our first sense. Indeed, some professional roles, and particularly medical ones, are such that a person can identify his whole personality with them. For such a person, to be a moral being just is to be a doctor, nurse, or whatever, where these roles are defined by the current ethics of the profession. The moral duties of life which are for most people diffused over many areas and activities have for the dedicated doctor a sharper focus, and insofar as they are more sharply defined they can have a degree of strength which outweighs all other claims on him. Seen in this way professional ethics are a source of inspiration, and a profession becomes a vocation or a calling. Professional ethics can thus be ordinary morality at its finest, and the third sense of 'ethics' becomes a specialised case of the first.

Codified procedures and ethics

It is possible, however, and perhaps it is not uncommon, for the institutional side to professional ethics to become dominant. When that happens the emphasis is placed on professional procedures, procedures which may of course be justified but can seem artificial or just plain comic, as when it is a matter of precedence in the ward round. This gives us a fourth sense of 'ethics', when the term acquires a specific content which refers to codified procedures, but lacks the prescriptive force of morality. An example of 'ethics' used in this descriptive, procedural sense can be found in the reaction of the Ethical Committee of the British Medical Association to the virginity tests alleged to have been carried out on Asian immigrant women at Heathrow Airport. A spokesman for the BMA is reported as having said that while such tests may have been morally wrong there was nothing unethical about them.[1] Presumably the meaning of this is that there

was nothing in the codified procedures of the BMA which could be interpreted as ruling out such tests. 'Ethics' in this procedural, quasi-legal sense is distinct from 'morals' or 'morality' in the first sense, as we can see if we consider that it is possible to decide by a majority vote what will or will not count as *ethical* in this sense, whereas an action or a practice cannot be made *morally* right or wrong by a majority decision or piece of legislation. Thus, it is logically possible, and perhaps not uncommon, for someone to dissent on moral grounds from a decree that a given practice is ethically right or wrong in the descriptive sense. For example, it might be decided by the Ethical Committee of the BMA, or other such body, that providing AID for lesbians is ethically wrong or right, but a doctor or social worker might well dissent from such a decree on moral grounds, just as we might object morally to certain laws although they have been enacted by Parliament. Ethics, in this sense of codified procedures, does not in itself, then, have moral force, although clearly any member of a profession has a moral duty to consider the codified procedures of his profession and to act on them unless he can show good reason why he ought not – just as a citizen has a general moral duty to obey the law of the land and may dissent only if he can show morally good grounds for his dissent.

Ethics and moral philosophy

'Ethics', finally, is often used to refer to that branch of philosophy also called 'moral philosophy'. Thus, philosophers write books with titles such as *The Methods of Ethics* or *Principia Ethica*, and such books are concerned with the philosophical study of the principles governing man's life in society. Ethics in this sense is a theoretical, second-order study of practical, first-order morality or ethics, and its aim is to bring about an intellectual understanding of the nature of moral action and judgement. It does not follow from this that moral philosophy as a theoretical study has no relevance to practical morality. Perhaps an analogy from music may help here. The study of the form and structure of music is a purely theoretical study, but nevertheless a performer will have a better overall grasp of the music he is playing if he has this theoretical knowledge. There are of course musicians with an intuitive insight into the music they are playing, just as there are ordinary moral agents with an intuitive insight into moral situations, but it remains true that most people will have a more informed awareness of morality if they have some theoretical grasp of the principles underlying it.

It will be clear from the foregoing that discussions of at least some words can be both controversial – not to be settled by appeals to dictionaries or stipulations – and important, since confusions over the meaning of 'ethics' (for example) may lead to serious misunderstandings among members of a profession or between a profession and the general public.

Reference

[1]Editorial. *World medicine*, March 10 1979, p 99.